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# Lifestyle Adaptations in Multicultural Student Housing: Case Studies in Japan and in USA

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## LIFESTYLE ADAPTATIONS IN MULTICULTURAL STUDENT HOUSING – CASE STUDIES IN JAPAN AND IN USA

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### Abstract

*Accelerated mobility necessitates mixed culture living environments in nations where the majority of citizens are of a single-ethnic group and speak the same language. These countries, including Japan, are under great pressure to provide living environments that accommodate diverse culture. Originally multi-ethnic nations such as USA also have remaining issues in true equality of different ethnic groups and religions.*

*In Japan, traditional housing had a lot of shared spaces, but the trend after the WWII was toward a higher level of privacy. Recently, however, shared space or community space has become revalued for educational purposes and sustainability. And international students from other cultures prefer to adapt traditional Japanese ways of living or community spaces to make the best of the limited size and equipments of their rooms. Even the lack of privacy may become a tool for encouraging communication. Coexistence of different cultures in a shared space sometimes helps the effective use of limited resources.*

*In the international student housing survey in USA, cultural lifestyles and the Anglo-Saxon oriented planning theory were conflicting. We observed that minority lifestyles were still being ignored after years of multi-cultural living, although they may give us good suggestions for community building and sustainable living. In comparable cases, simpler room plans seemed to allow more freedom for residents to use their apartment to maintain their cultural lifestyle. We also observed, however, that cultural lifestyles have been rapidly disappearing in globalization in the last decade or two.*

*These are only a limited number of case studies, and there may be different types of cultural conflicts and situations in other places. These cases, however, have suggested that cultural lifestyles are worth revaluing. Therefore, this article opens discussions on how other people have been accommodating diversity and how we should plan the multi-cultural living environment in the future.*

**Keywords:** diversity, dormitory, tradition, community, planning

## INTRODUCTION

“ERASMUS” and “ERASMUS MUNDUS” started in Europe in 1987 and 2003 respectively. “100,000 Foreign Students Action Plan” and “300,000 International Student Action Plan” started in Japan in 1983 and 2004 respectively. Other student mobility programs followed suit all over the world, and today we see many international students at campuses. In these newly diversified countries, administrators at higher education institutions are struggling to minimize cultural conflicts especially in the living environment where different lifestyle matters. On the other hand, countries like USA, Canada, Australia and UK have more experience in accepting international students as well as having a long history of accepting immigrants. Although the legal and social systems in these preceding countries are more established to accommodate cultural diversity, but there are still some misunderstandings, conflicts and virtual discrimination with deep roots.

## TERMINOLOGY

### Types of nations

We use two categories for discussion purpose although we are aware that things are not that simple. The first category is ‘homogeneous nations’, which originally were almost-homogeneous countries but have started accepting diversity in the last couple of decades. The second category is ‘multiethnic nations’, which have a longer history of having a multi-ethnic population both on campus and in the entire country. In this paper, we case studied Japan to make a representative for ‘homogeneous nation’, and USA for ‘multiethnic nation’.

### Types of international student housing

‘International student housing’ refers to both collective housing specifically designed for international students and regular student dormitories which coincidentally have a big ratio of international students. In this paper, we call the former ‘international houses’ as they are typically called in USA, and the latter ‘international dormitories’.

### Types of students

‘International students’ in this paper refers to those who recently came from other country to study. ‘Domestic students’ refers to not just a citizen of that country but also refers to foreigners who grew up there; e.g. permanent residents, immigrants and their descendents. ‘Resident advisors’ a.k.a. ‘resident assistants’ refers to students who are assigned to help residents at international student housings, paid or non-paid, international or domestic.

## CASE STUDY IN JAPAN

### Background

According to many visitors, cities in Japan are clean and comfortable, and most Japanese people are amicable and hospitable. According to long-term residents including international students, however, life in Japan is not that easy because the living environment there is not ready to accommodate diverse lifestyles. More than 95 percent of native citizens are of the same biological origin, having similar customs in each region, and most people only speak Japanese. Local apartments are designed by Japanese standards for Japanese lifestyles even though many of them appear to be westernised on the surface. Some landlords discriminate foreigners partially because of their fear for the different lifestyle and partially because of

financial concerns. The Japanese custom of requiring a local guarantor and advanced payment of ‘key money’ in rental contracts has been a big obstacle for foreigners, although the situation is improving for students since schools began to provide ‘institutional guarantee’. The national and regional governments are trying to accommodate foreigners in their society (Cabinet Secretariat 2012), yet they do not know how to do this because of the different culture and lifestyle. Unfortunately, some locals discriminate certain groups of ‘foreigners’ or tend to be judgemental (Ministry of Justice 2012).

## Methods

The author’s research team visited 40 international student dormitories, interviewed 38 staff members and 158 residents, and conducted a written survey with 200 international students during 2010-2012 (Suzuki et al., 2013, 2012, 2011 and 2010).

## Observations in Multi-Cultural Living

Language is not really a big issue when it comes to students because they quickly adopt the local language (Suzuki 2010). Almost all housing managers complained, however, that many international students did not observe the local rules of daily life such as garbage disposal. Some international students are also said to make common spaces untidy or dirty, but it depends more on the individuals. The two biggest complaints from international students are about the small size of their room and the lack of privacy (Suzuki 2010). Sound insulation between private rooms is typically weak in dormitory layouts with shared kitchen, bath and living room. Noise from neighbouring rooms is the most typical complaints in student housing (Suzuki 2010). It seems that the allowance of noise is different from culture to culture, thus it is difficult to set a rule that satisfies everyone. Some people also have different time schedules than other cultures. For example, the time of dinner for European is much later than that of Americans and Asians. Some people take shower in the morning and others do in the evening. Such time differences may become a cause of conflict when noise and other disturbance are an issue. In some cases with shared baths or shared kitchens, however, the cultural time difference effectively dispersed users and helped to ease congestions within their small facilities.

## Adapting to The Small Room Size

In Japan, studio apartments called ‘*one room mansion*’ are typical for student housing in both private apartments and college dormitories. It usually comes with a room of 10-20 square meters including a bed and a kitchen in the same space, and a separate all-in-one bathroom called ‘*unit bath*’ of 1-2 square meters (Figure 1). Studying, relaxing, dining, and sleeping all in the same room used to be normal in traditional Japanese houses until the idea of ‘dining kitchen’ appeared in the 1950’s after the theory of ‘separation of eating and sleeping quarters in small houses’ (Nishiyama 1942). The mixed-use or flexible use of rooms was an effective way of making the most of the limited space in Japan. Semi-hard ‘*tatami*’ straw mats and the foldable ‘*futon*’ mattress enabled such a use of rooms. These items have also been disappearing since the western influence in Japan. Now we have a fixed western style bed in the same small bedroom of 10-13 square meters, which leaves no room for other activities than sleeping. Therefore, some international students remove the furnished bed from their dorm rooms and sleep on the floor, and others choose a traditional Japanese room with *tatami* mats to begin with. In this case, the supposed demerits sublime to merits as well: The limited space in outdated buildings consequently helps young foreign students to understand the merits of traditional wisdom. Some American students of convenient appliances noted that they learned to live with limited resource while in Japan (Suzuki 2004).



**Figure 1:** Typical ‘one room mansion’ or a single room in Japanese dormitories; sleep and study area (left), private kitchenette area (middle), and private ‘unit-bath’ (right)

### Kitchen Issues in Japan

In the all-in-one room of the ‘one room mansion’, there is only a small kitchenette that is usually not functional. Designers of such student apartments do not suppose the resident will seriously cook at home probably because many Japanese students living by themselves used to eat out. Recently, however, more and more students cook and eat alone at home probably because of their tight budget of living expenses (Seikyo 2013). In our survey, more than 75% of international students either always or mostly cook at home, which is especially the case for Chinese students. But the kitchenette in the Japanese studio apartment is too small for Chinese cooking. They also prefer to have a separate kitchen, even though many Japanese people today prefer ‘open kitchen’ style (Figure 2). Chinese students living in bigger apartments elaborate by using furniture, such as cupboards, to make a wall to separate the kitchen. Students in dormitories may cook in their shared kitchen, which is usually is large and fully equipped. Many students pointed out that their shared kitchen is a good community space for getting to know other residents in the dormitory. In this case, the supposed demerits sublime to merits as well: Shared facilities and insufficient private equipments may have been forced by the limited space or budget, but they help to foster a community as a result.



**Figure 2:** ‘Open kitchen’ style popular in Japan -living, studying, sleeping in one room (left); Chinese students by all means separate their cooking space from living area (right, 4 images)



## Privacy

From 1980's to the end of the last century, university administrators have been trying to provide international students with more privacy by providing all-equipped-in-one rooms for international student housing (Tada & Asano 2005). However, problems such as isolation, mental illness and illegal residency seem to happen more often in self-contained apartments with more privacy. Therefore, the recent trend is more towards providing safety and good human relations. Some universities even provide old-fashioned double rooms shared by pairs of international and domestic students for educational purposes. A shared unit with a couple of private single rooms, a shared bathroom and a shared dining-kitchen is somewhat typical. 'Soft privacy' provided by connected rooms, with a curtain or a sliding door between each resident, may have derived from the paper partitions of traditional Japanese houses. Students living in such shared rooms or connecting rooms testify that living with someone else is difficult, but when they get to discuss how to share the room, they understand each other better (APU 2007). Opening and closing the boundary, in the case of connecting rooms, could produce some kind of complex feeling, requiring them to ask things like 'May I open?' or 'May I close?' in order to avoid misunderstandings. Such a moment creates verbal communication and helps to break the ice between the roommates, according to some interviewed residents. In this case as well, the idea of shared space and facilities, which originally resulted from the limitation of resources, consequently works educationally and helps inter-cultural understanding.

## Localization for Internationalization

In the field survey of international student housings in Japan, we observed that students are quick to adapt to new living environments such as small space, shared facilities and various definitions of 'privacy'. We also observed that such limitations and cultural differences might help the residents to accept the limited resource, encourage communication and foster a better multi-cultural community (Figure 3). Learning from these examples, it may be better to positively utilize the local particularity, or traditional style, in future planning of multi-cultural living environment, instead of blindly imposing the uniformity everywhere.



**Figure 3:** Students gathering in a community space in a dormitory (left); 'kotatsu', or Japanese heated low table on the floor, preferred by international students over sofas (right)

## CASE STUDY IN USA

### Background

USA started as an immigrants' nation, which went through many inter-ethnicity conflicts. After the efforts to solve these problems for years through civil rights movements, they established a legally 'equal society' in 1960's. Now the law strictly prohibits discriminating against anyone because of his or her property or background such as language, ethnicity, gender, religion or physical conditions. Laws such as the American Disability Act, or ADA, strictly protect the human rights of physically challenged people within their society, especially in public spaces. There are, however, still some people who discriminate others consciously or subconsciously, as often reported in the news or seen on an everyday basis. In architectural planning, the influence of Anglo-Saxon culture is still dominant, even though citizens of different ethnic groups have different lifestyles (Suzuki 1997).

### Methods

Student housing of two internationally renowned public universities in California were surveyed. Those housing complexes were not specifically planned international students, but almost half of the residents were international with as many as forty different nationalities. One of them went through a complete redevelopment with drastic change during 1998-2008 (Suzuki, 2012). We conducted a survey in 1996-1997 and in 2008, before and after the redevelopment respectively.

### Conflicts Observed in Multi-Cultural Living

As is the case in Japan, noise was the biggest complaint in the student housings which we surveyed. Though newer housings have improved their insulation, and the managements hear less complaints about the noise, there seemed to be another factor in those complaints which was not often observed in Japan's case; the racial discrimination by physical appearance. Even though the law guarantees the equality of all people, the law cannot control their being judgemental. For example, courtyard apartments are supposed to create the best sense of community according to the Anglo-Saxon theory of house planning, but if one is not blended in the community, the situation may become worse. Such cases were often observed such as an African American family feeling uncomfortable in a Caucasian dominant community, or vice versa.

### Kitchen Issues in USA

For undergraduates, dormitories with 'room and board' are still dominant in USA, and cooking habits do not become an issue very often. For graduate and family students, however, a different custom of kitchen use sometimes produces a cultural conflicts; for example Chinese cooking requires more oil, heat and ventilation. Some Chinese residents have to change their cooking style, while others continue to cook in their own style and get complaints from their neighbours or receive warnings from their management concerning fires. Japanese residents are said to use, or waste, more water in their kitchen. They also receive complaints from their roommates for leaving dishes and kitchen equipments wet. Smell from kitchen may also become an issue; for example, Indians may receive complaints for their spices, and Koreans for their kimchee. For different customs, compromising to some extent may be necessary. Some residents, however, learn to cook foreign food from their neighbours and become interested in foreign culture.

## Laundry Issues

Many Asians and some Europeans have a custom of hanging laundry outside in public for drying purposes, but it may not be acceptable for most Americans. Westerners care more about how their neighbourhood appears, whereas Asians tend to be more practical (Figure 4). Rental apartments for students do not usually come with space for washing and drying machines, and it is typical for residents to go to coin operated laundry rooms. In student housing, however, many people wish to have a washing machine at their home because of the time and budget constraints. In older days, everyone had washing machine wherever they liked. In 1960's, washer and dryer space had been provided in apartments. It was eliminated in the new development, and then we found many international students installed a portable washing machine in their bathroom against the housing contract (Figure 5). Using a dryer is customary in USA nowadays, and many Americans think that hanging laundry is visually disturbing. However, sun drying was a common practice there in previous generations, according to some Americans. Energy saving is a global goal, and utilizing the free and sustainable solar energy seems to be a matter of course for some people.



**Figure 4:** Chinese quarter with laundry hung outside before redevelopment (1996, left), planned aesthetic landscaping after redevelopment (2008, right)



**Figure 5:** washing machine outside apartment in 1940's apartments (left)  
washer and dryer space provided in kitchen in 1960's apartments (middle)  
illegally installed portable washer in new 2000's apartments (right)



## Enclosure

Enclosure seems to give many people a sense of security, and it was recommended in some popular house planning theories (Marcus & Sarkissian 1988). In multi-cultural housing as we surveyed, however, less interaction outside the enclosure was observed. In cases where each apartment has a private yard, the common courtyard was less actively used. According to a preceding quantitative survey on one of the surveyed housing (Amam 2007) and to many other management staff and residents interviewed, interaction among the entire community became less active after the redevelopment (Figure 6).



**Figure 6:** a courtyard after (left) and before redevelopment (right)

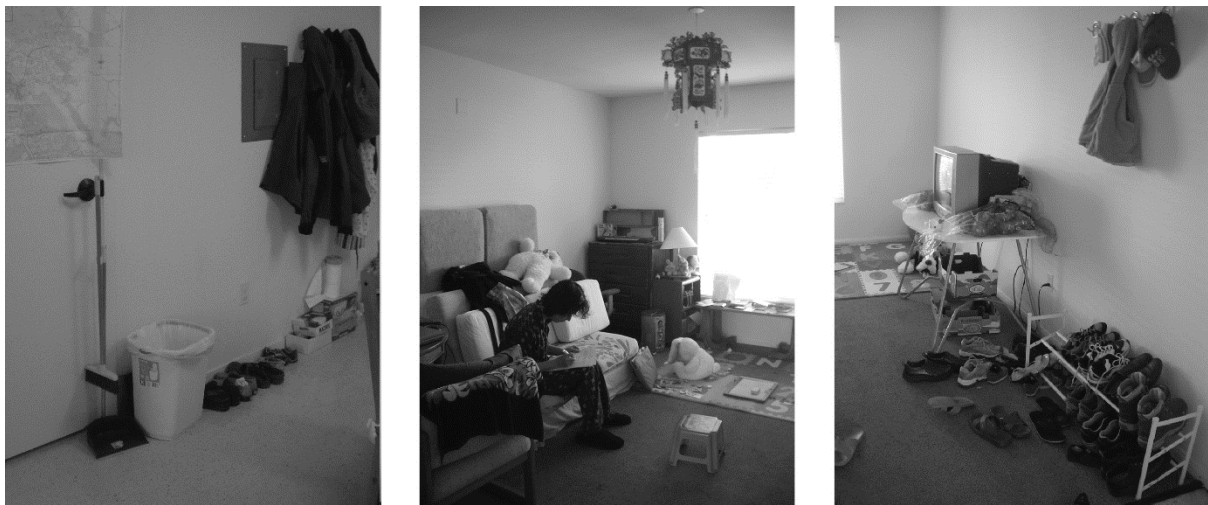
## Shoes Inside Apartments

Traditionally speaking, Japanese, Korean and some Scandinavian people take off their shoes inside their house, or use separate ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ shoes. On the contrary, American, Chinese and central or southern European people keep their shoes on until they go to bed. The decision seems to derive from the materials of the floor; you would feel comfortable being barefoot when you are on the soft and warm wood floorings, but need to have shoes on if the floor is made of cold stone. In California, however, most residential buildings are wooden, and residents are regularly exposed to Asian culture, and more people started to take off their shoes when entering their house. Students with small toddlers and young children especially do so because they wish to keep the floor clean. In China nowadays, about 90% of educated urban residents take off their shoes and use slippers or room-shoes inside. Even though this trend is so clear, designers of the surveyed housing did not prepare any space to change or store shoes. As a result, shoes were randomly left behind outside the room in many apartments simply because there is no room for ‘shoes leaving’ (Figure 7).

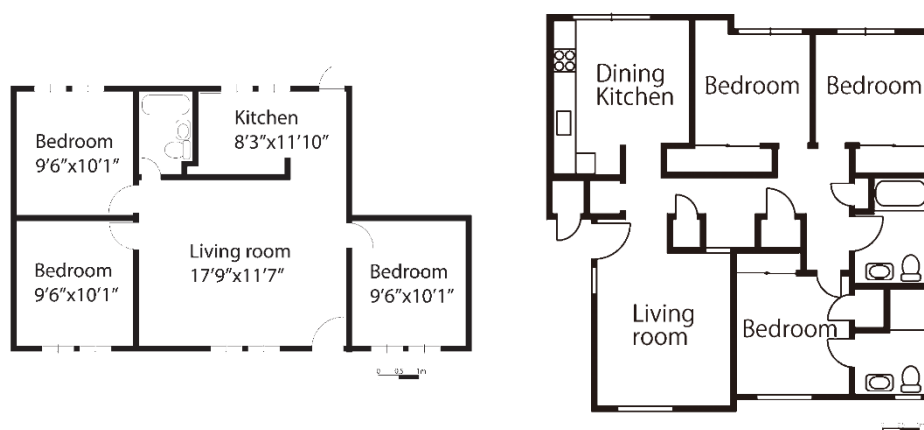
## Room Layouts and Patterns of Habitation

Before the redevelopment of one of surveyed housings, there were cultural patterns of habitation clearly observed. 12 years later after the redevelopment, however, such patterns were disappeared completely. The reason why it happened, even though national and ethnical diversity of population remained the same, is unknown. It may simply be the different time and level of globalization of the society. The difference in planning, however, may also have influenced: Before the redevelopment, however, there was only one type of simple room layout for 1-bedroom, 2-bedroom and 3-bedroom apartments respectively. Each bedroom had an

almost equal area and character, and they gave users freedom on how they assign and use rooms. After the redevelopment, there are as many as eleven different types of apartments, with each plan clearly indicating how spaces in the apartment should be used (Figure 8).



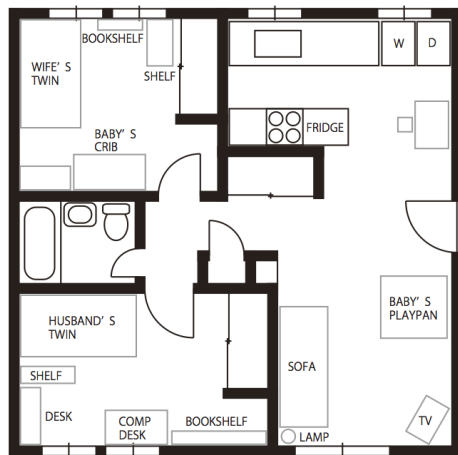
**Figure 7:** shoes left inside apartments (left, right), and resident relaxed in slipper (middle)



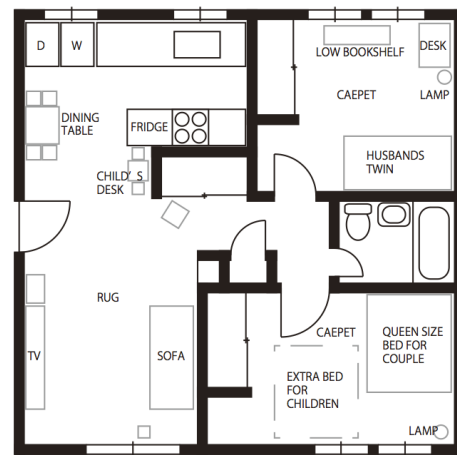
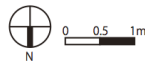
**Figure 8:** an example of simpler old plan with equal bedrooms before redevelopment (left), an example of new plan clearly indicating expected room assignment and use (right)

### Cultural Patterns of Habitation Before the Redevelopment

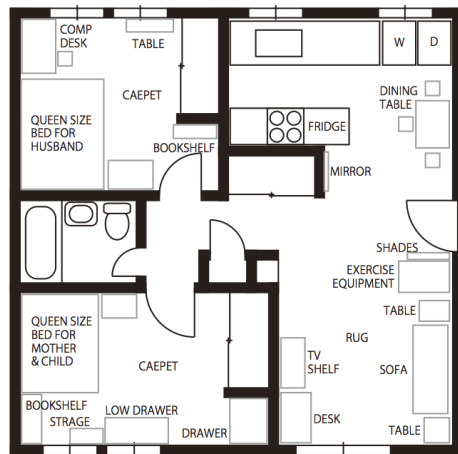
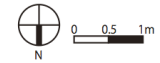
In the residents survey in 1996, we observed that 2-bedroom apartments with the exact same room layout were used in various different ways. At that time, the tendency seemed to be cultural: Chinese families assigned one room for the husband and the other for the rest of the family because for the husband succeeding in his studies and thus getting a degree was more important for the family than anything else. Korean families always keep their living room open with little furniture so that they can invite a large group of friends, sometimes as many as 30 people at once, and have gatherings. Japanese families were noticeable for their flexible use of rooms and for not showing any common rules. European families always separated a child's room and a parents' room (Figure 9 & 10). In the survey in 2008 after the redevelopment, there were much less cultural differences observed (Suzuki 2013).



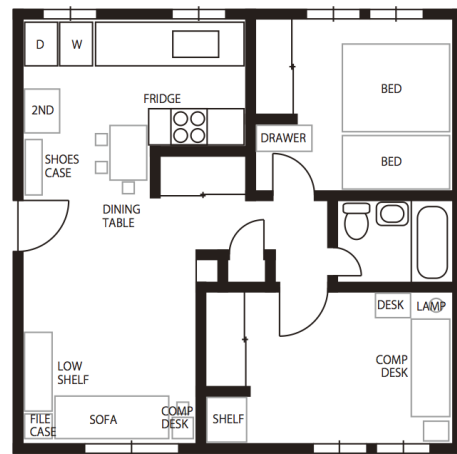
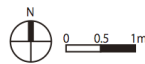
**K (Chinese)**



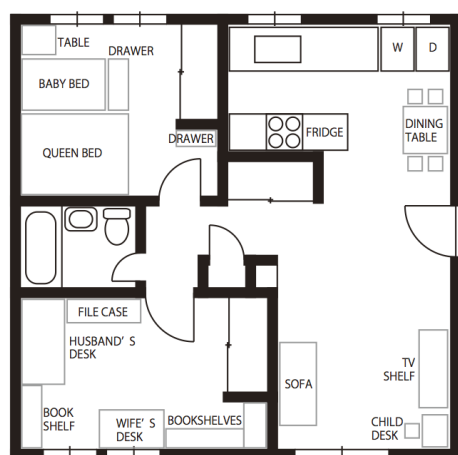
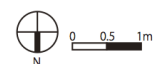
**L (Chinese)**



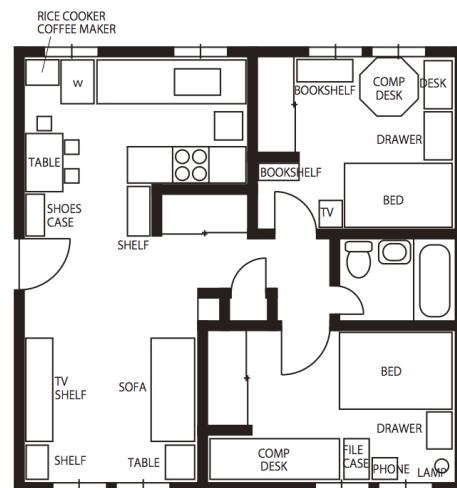
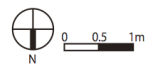
**M (Chinese)**



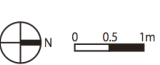
**N (Korean)**



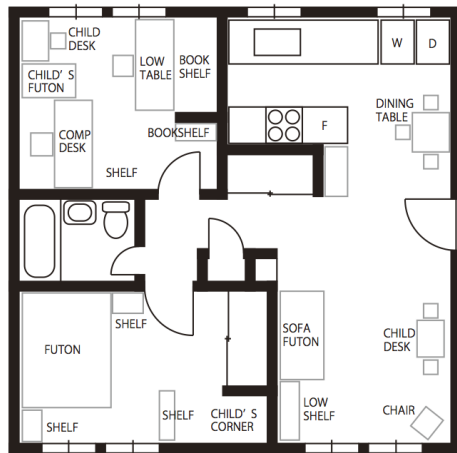
**O (Korean)**



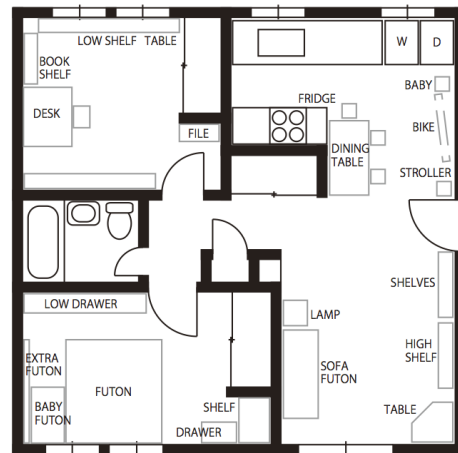
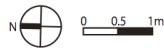
**P (Korean)**



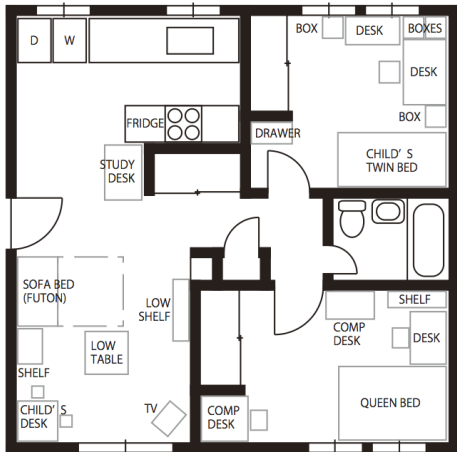
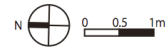
**Figure 9: Room usages by Chinese and Korean families, surveyed in 1996**



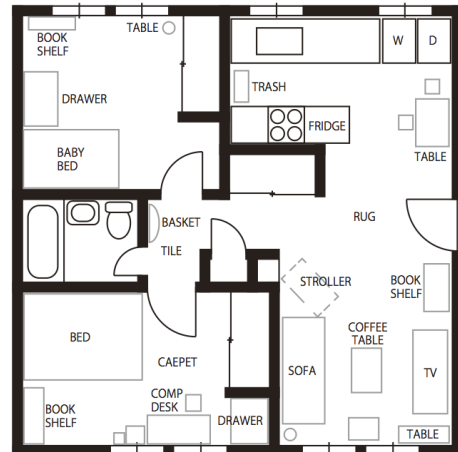
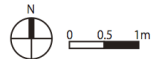
Q (Japanese)



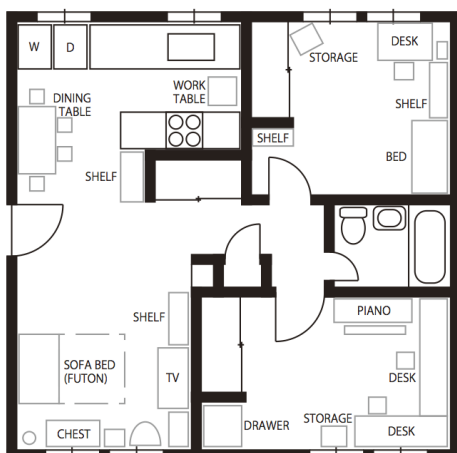
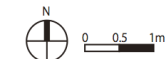
R (Japanese)



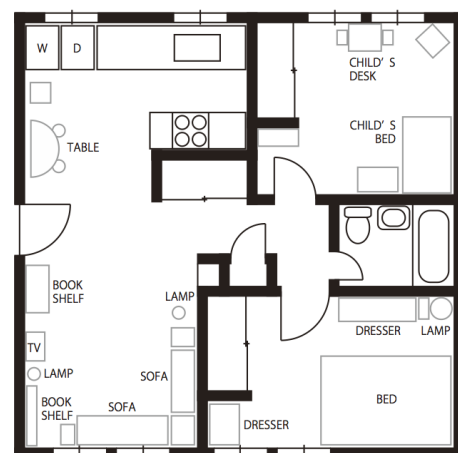
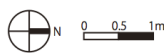
S (Japanese)



T (European)



U (European)



V (European)

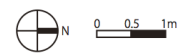


Figure 10: Room usages by Japanese and European families, surveyed in 1996



## CONCLUSIONS

From these surveys, we learned two things: First, limitation of resources can be sublimed to become an effective tool for community building and sustainable planning. For example, sharing spaces because of the area limitation encourages communication among residents and even helps inter-cultural understanding. Second, the cultural differences in lifestyle has become smaller and almost invisible in the last couple of decades, and we can expect international students to adapt new lifestyles easily. Combining these two findings, we propose to utilize the architectural resource that we already have in each country, especially the ones with cultural characteristics. It will not just save some valuable resources but also creates a better international community.

## FURTHER DISCUSSIONS

The simple plan seen in the American student housings before the redevelopment somewhat resembles Japanese '*kaidan-shitsu-gata*' room plan typically seen in '*danchi*' or public sector's apartment complex built during 1950-1970's. In such plans, two apartments on each floor share a staircase with entrance doors facing each other. With this type of plan, each apartment has windows on both sides, which allows good ventilation as well as giving all bedrooms equality, and therefore making them capable of being assigned and used in any ways. There are many '*danchi*' resources in Japan which have come to a crossroads between demolition and conversion. Some of these apartments have been converted to international student housing for recycling purpose and we have already seen some successful cases. We may want to consider utilizing not just these old '*danchi*' apartments but also some traditional Japanese houses with flexible room use to accommodate cultural diversity.

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Ms. Tavia Tipton, associate manager, and Mr. Cephas John, housing coordinator

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Dr. Yasushi Suzuki, director, Saraya, Co., Ltd.

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